



Jim Rankin/Torstar Network

RJ Barrett and his Duke University teammates played two games at the Paramount Fine Foods Centre against Ryerson University and the University of Toronto on Aug. 15 and 17.

'A GREAT ENVIRONMENT TO BE IN': RJ BARRETT ENJOYS HOMECOMING

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DUKE UNIVERSITY STAR EMBRACING THE SPOTLIGHT

IAIN COLPITTS
icolpitts@mississauga.net

If early impressions are any indication, RJ Barrett is going to handle the spotlight at Duke University just fine.

After a month of being on campus with the iconic North Carolina basketball program, the Mississauga native was fortunate enough to return home for his first two games in a Duke uniform last week against Ryerson University and the University of Toronto at the Paramount Fine Foods Centre.

During a much-anticipated trip up north for three exhibition games, Barrett and fellow freshman Zion Williamson had several cameras on them as the team is part of a series airing on ESPN+ in the fall.

However, Barrett, ESPN's top freshman for 2018, has learned to roll with the punches and knows that kind of attention is going to come with having a freshman class as strong as Duke's.

"I've always played with high level competition my

whole life, but to be on a team with Zion, Cam (Reddish), Tre (Jones), guys of that calibre, we all kind of get it and are going through the same thing," Barrett said. "It's great to have guys like that help you out."

Barrett's return to Canada before starting his collegiate career was rather serendipitous.

NCAA programs are allowed to go on an international trip once every four years.

Duke was going to go on a tour last year, but head coach Mike Krzyewski underwent knee replacement surgery, so they chose Canada this year. The tour also included a stop in Montreal to face McGill University on Sunday, Aug. 19.

Since leading Canada to gold at the 2017 FIBA Under-19, Barrett has become a household name in Canada. Two sold out crowds at the Paramount Fine Foods Centre got a glimpse of Barrett's talent as he averaged 34.5 points per game against Ryerson and U of T.

"I saw like a whole section of my family and friends. Everybody was everywhere," he said after the game against Ryerson on Wednesday, Aug. 15. "It was a great

environment to be in."

Barrett committed to Duke in November and went on to earn the Gatorade National Player of the Year Award while leading Florida's Montverde Academy to an undefeated season.

In Mississauga, his talent was on full display through several highlight dunks and alley-oop passes to Williamson. More impressive than his abilities is his temperament, according to Krzyewski.

"Every day he shows his maturity in the way he handles things, his relationships with the coaches and with me," Krzyewski said. "He's just a fun guy to be with and a winner. He's a special kid, a special player."

Williamson, the second-ranked player in ESPN's 2018 freshmen class, echoed that assessment. He and Barrett had known each other for the last few years, even before they met in person.

The duo have bonded instantly, both on and off the court.

"A lot of people think athletes are these big-headed people because of all the light they get, but we're all just kids and want to have fun," Williamson said. "He's just a really nice kid."